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Oral history interview with Gene Buvelot, whose Native American affiliation is with the Coastal Miwok
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done by Rae Swanson and Evelyn McClure for the
Western Sonoma County Historical Society/West County Museum

(For Information Only, Release Form not requested from Gene Buvelot, contact Gene if you want to publish information)

Gene: Though the process called "acknowledgment" you put all your paperwork in and submit your petition to recognized as a tribe, through the acknowledgment process and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The paperwork has been sitting on the shelf for 20 years.

E: There are so many, when you talk about Pomo, from what I've been reading, there are so many villages, groups, were any of those people recognized?

G: oh yeah, Kashia Pomo, Cloverdale, Dry Creek they're recognized.

E: Did they have to go through a procedure to do it?

G: No they were on paperwork in the 1800's so when it came time to form a rancheria. In California they call them rancherias (vs. reservations) I'm not sure what they call the one at Hoopa. I think that's a reservation, in Sonoma County they'll are all rancherias. Are you familiar with our territory, what it was?

E: A little but tell me.

G: It all of Marin and southern Sonoma County from there heading east to Occidental, over to, touches Sebastopol area down to Rohnert Park, including Sonoma, Glen Ellen, and then the mountains that separate Napa from Sonoma.

R: ...with Pomo.

G: Yes, then the groups became tribal groups like Mark West
Getting back to the acknowledgment process. We prepared a lot of paperwork to submit to that process. We have 363 members now on the application. Our genealogist had to show who was on the roll in 1852. You had to be linked to someone on the roll in 1852.

E: An Indian census of 1852?

G: Right. We have 20 families. And he was on the roll (William Smith)
His father was Stephen Smith. Tom Smith was his half brother, they had the same mothers. We show everyone going back that far. We had to do all that, show the history of the group through Mission records, anything that's written in the county to show that we did exist. Maybe about 3 years ago, our attorney discovered some paperwork where the government actually did (adopt?) the Graton Rancheria in the early 20s. It was not widely known it was so small that

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only a few families could live on the property but the government didn't provide housing or cost for building houses, so maybe a handful actually built a house. I think they were platforms.

E: It was a couple of acres?

G: Right now there is only 1 family. One of our tribal members was able to hold onto the land because in 1966 it was terminated. So we found that paperwork and what our attorney suggested was we switched our process from the acknowledgment process over to the restoration. .....For the homeless Indians of the Bodega, Tomales Bay area, Sebastopol.

R: In the 20's?

G: In the 20's. When it was terminated in 1966 or so. The families had to pay taxes on the land... though the lands were given up or sold because they couldn't afford the taxes, but only family held on.

E: Do you know how many acres there were at first?

G: Originally something like 15. For the amount of people that were known at that time, it was too small, they couldn't have gone there. But it was a gathering point during the picking seasons. I remember my father saying Indians were welcome to camp on the land.

R: What was the location?

G: In the town of Graton, Occidental Road. That area was not flat. Hills, so you couldn't do anything with the land. That was the history of giving Indians land.

E: Naturally the worst.

G: No water, or creek. So when we found that we switched our process to the acknowledgment process which meant we didn't have to go through the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We could be restored by an act of Congress and we have a bill in there right now. That was introduced in March. It was introduced once before but we had that shooting in Congress and things stopped then, then we had the Clinton fiasco and that killed it so it had to be reintroduced this March (1999) to keep it alive.

R: So you have to keep on your toes to keep it going.

G: We do have another bill that looks like it will be introduced this Spring (2000) that's been pushed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and this for the terminated tribes, there are 7 of us that are on that bill. So whatever goes first, that gets out of the Committee will restore us. There were a number of tribes, somewhere in the teens, there was more, they have to do all the paperwork too. Genealogies, they gave them a couple months to submit paperwork, if they didn't have it by

then they didn't want them on this list, so they dragged the other tribes down, maybe come back to them later.

R: You have to be pretty well organized to accomplish that...

G: So that possibly will be introduced in a few months, that one. That one know, in order to have Lynn Woolsey (Marin-Sonoma Congresswoman) act on our bill we had to put a non gaming clause in it .

E: The other tribes are all over the United States?

G: The other tribes are looking at us, I guess we're the closest to San Francisco. They tell us we'd be the most richest tribe in the nation (if they put in a casino) bigger than the one in Connecticut. So I think this has given Lynn an initiative to try to get this bill pushed through, which she has promised to do, get it up on the table. Our tribal members have seen some problems with the gaming especially with the families involved. You have to bring in professionals. It doesn't work. It's sort of the history of our process of getting together officially since 1992 and where we are now. On March 16 we're gonna have something and tell what the facts are, to tell the public there is a local tribe.

E: Are they going to have other events that day. Or is it like a town hall meeting sort of thing?

G: Yes, It will be published by MAPOM (Miwok Archeological Preserve of Marin)

E: Are you going to advertise it in Sonoma County.

G: We hope to, the newspapers there too. That 's our recent, sort of what we're going.

E: Do you have any written things.?

G: March 16, on a Thursday evening.

E: The Sonoma West wanted to now more, they could cover this and it would be an introduction to meet some of the people involved.

G: Going back in family history, on my side of the family. Bodega Bay is where my people were. In Marin County they're finding (artifacts) they are dating back to 6,000 years. Oolampali Park they found items from 6,000 BC. I think that is the oldest burial they've found. They are doing another (dig) by Mill Valley where the free way comes along.

E: Do have a lot of stories way back to Bill Smith that have been passed on in your family? Can you tell us something about your family as far back as you know?

G: Our family started with Stephen Smith. He had...the family said they were married in the Indian Way which wasn't recognized (by the church or white government) and had William Smith and Young Smith in the 1860s. In the 1850s they marched all the Indians off from the Coast, Marshall, Bodega and they came into Marin County also. Marched they up to Round Valley and Young Smith's first wife died on that march. She is buried somewhere along I guess. (Bill Smith) got away, didn't like it there and came back. Because he was light, his father was from Maryland, wherever Stephen Smith came from. Was able to get back, get back into the community and hold onto the land at Bodega Bay. So one of his daughters, Margaret Smith was my grandmother. In 1909 married my grandfather who was Marc Louis Buvelot. In his obituary he had a fish market and also a saloon in Sebastopol. Here's the saloon and this is the market part. There's my grandmother. I don't know where it was.
On the original of the bar, with a magnifying glass on it you can pick up the year on the calendar on the wall. I used it for the Museum display in Bolinas.

R: Do you know the name of his market?

G: No never saw anything.

E: You can find it maybe from ads in the newspaper

G: This was 1936, whatever it was called at that time (in Sebastopol or Santa Rosa) cause they took the name of the landowner, when last names were given, But it says at the end "a beautiful Indian Lass" sort of acknowledge she is. (this was a wedding story in the newspaper?)

E: Do you think that was in the Sebastopol Times?

G: No I think this was in Napa. Because they were coming to Napa to be married. This is one of the sisters, Eileen, I guess she was called Smith at the time. She was 16. These are actually the beads she was wearing in the picture.

R: Oh how fortunate you are to have that.

G: And the headbands. This was in the exhibit too (in Bolinas) These were actually made by William Smith. Gave to my grandmother. I don't know if she let her use these (when the picture was taken) They would give things on special occasions. I know I have a basket that was given to my grandmother when my aunt.... I do know they were made between 1880 and he stopped around early 19.... He (Bill Smith) was known to mass produce them. He had a grinding wheel he turned sideways, There were beads on loan to the Museum in San Francisco for a number of years (Randall Jr. Museum) and they disappeared.

E: Your mother? (picture)

G: No, This was dated the same day as the birth of my father.

R: Its a boy.

G: Getting back to the history and Bodega Bay.

E: Were all 5 sons involved with the fishing? What were their names?

G: Yes, Eli, Angelo, Young Ernest, William Jr. , Stephen, the oldest, the first one to die in, Eddie, 6 sons and 4 daughters. William and Eddie served in the military, which they used in the exhibit also. It was a way to gain citizenship, because at the time, Indians weren't citizens. The women got suffrage before the Indians did. So by going into the service they became citizens, in World War I.

R: Their wives as well?

G: I'm not sure on the particulars of that. Actually any children I guess probably would (be citizens) In most cases, our people at Bodega Bay, I'm not aware of the people of Tomales, Marshall area. My grandfather came from Switzerland (Marc L. Buvelot) This is in Sebastopol here. High Street. That's Rosalie Charles and my father and my aunt. (looking at pictures)

G: The fishing industry, all the brothers worked at Bodega Bay. Grandmother after the kids were married. The house was in the middle of the parking lot. Someone gave me a photo of the house and the wharf. So the wharf there is now the yacht club (at Bodega Bay) Can you see her house in the parking lot (on a painting, Gene has) I used to spend my summers up there. On Smith Bros. road. My aunt would never acknowledge, she's in a rest home in Marin she's 93, who we are, but she always said that she was not Indian. Here's her sister, holding the Indian doll, she has a teddy bear. Luckily these came from family members or my dad had.

R: The house came down?

G: Yes, when it was sold in 1973. I was told, I don't know if that was the case, that the Indian kids were being rounded up to be taken to Indian School in Riverside and different places. This was 1926.

E: They just took kids away from their families?

G: Oh yes, my mother said this kept them in school because the landowners said they were a good workers, picker of crops. This gave them authority to stay in school and not go (Gene has document) permitting them to enter high school and not leave.

E/R/G: Where did he (Gene's grandfather?) do to school? Analy, cause he was living in Sebastopol.

E: At what point did Indians become citizens and get rights live everybody else?

G: The book that MAPOM puts out...there are a lot of coast Miwok stuff in families but they are not in a museum, taking stuff in for appraisal, they said I could name my price, a mortar stone I have in the back yard we use as a fountain. That's been in the family since 1906. Near Watson School there is a hill by the creek where the road cuts through, in 1906, the hill slid and out of the hill popped this huge (weighs 190 lbs) mortar that has a round rim. When they sold at the Bay, there was stairs going up to Hy. 1, my father remembered they had put it underneath the stairs where all the grass was because they were afraid it was going to be stolen. We had that in the Randall Museum also, because we were living in San Francisco and had no place to put it. When I bought a house in San Bruno, used to keep gold fish in there. Traditionally could have been used for keeping water at the village too. they used to pound small animals, birds. They also used the bones. They'd pound it, didn't grind it. Lot of people think they grind acorns. If you grind you get pieces of rock. If you pound you keep the material between the rock and pestle.

R: Then they'd use that meat as dried?

G: Well you roast it, once its pulverized. Gutted and cleaned and pulverized. We've heard stories too, that you bring water from the creek and store it there (in the mortar)

E: What did you do with your life? Go to school and...

G; I worked up here a couple years in 1965, in Marin. I used to spend my summers in Sonoma County. Also had a family place in St. Helena, got that in 50's I used to go up with my grandmother. I worked a couple years here as a mortician. Chapel of Marin here in Novato. Went to mortuary college. Was looking around for a place to work, they weren't paying that much. A friend worked at Bank of America in their printing dept. he said they had an opening. I took that. That ended my mortuary business. I was with them 32 years with B of A. They eliminated the dept. I get my salary for a year and a half and will roll into retirement. My mortuary work helped me tribally too, cause I'm also listed in Sacramento as what they call the MLDs (most likely descendants) so when they find burials here, southern Sonoma, we get a call to negotiate with developer. or landowner.

R: You've maintained an interest in your family background...

G; The only regret I have is the language, the sisters were one of the last speakers. I used to pick my grandmother up from Bodega Bay and bring her to the city where my aunt lived, they would be arguing over the pronunciation of the words. I remember Tamalpais, she would call that Tamalpaiee, Oolampali was Oolampaliee. Paiee is mountain.

E: Does the dictionary exist, are there copies? (That the sisters put together)

G: Marin Museum. Its not in print anymore. That could be a project. They had a lot of copies in Berkeley and destroyed them all. They didn't sell.

R: What do you know about interrelationships between the Pomo and Miwok.? You're definitely saying Miwok

G; The language is totally different. The linguists call us pinutian (sp?) Hokan is the Pomo. That would be the difference like English and Chinese would be the difference between the two groups. Rosalie Charles who married William Smith was Pomo, she we are Pomo also. I guess that's what kept our people here when the Mission came in, Spanish. We married into Pomo families. Some of our tribal members have dual membership. They can be in Dry Creek, that was recently given some options to buy housing. There are recognized and unrecognized, so we've had a few reservations because of that. Once we are restored. We have to, those who have dual membership have to pick one. And they pick that now because they are getting medical benefits. The Sonoma County Indian Health Project and the education, which Coast Miwok don't get cause we're not an official tribe.

R: When you are an official tribe then those kinds of benefits...

G; Our role number will change, we may see more people come in because they want to...

R; How long was your family in Sebastopol? Your grandfather (M. Buvelot)

G; Well the house was there till World War II. My mother was Italian. Parents lived in..... What they were worried about was no privacy. Because of the size of the family you would constantly have people there, so they didn't think it would be a good idea to keep the place, so they sold it about 1945-46. I have a copy of the 1910 census which is fading. It shows them living there.

(Gene shows us ad for saloon/store)

G: Eli Smith had a 50th wedding anniversary, the family was so big they had to use the (Sonoma County) fairgrounds. In 1960-61. A lot more than 200 people.

Part of the acknowledgment process, we had to show gatherings that Indian people attended. And they listed a lot of people that were there. Most of the family member names are here. So this would have come into play as documentation.

R: what a job that is for a family to get that kind of information together on a deadline if you have only a few months to do it.

G: my father's sister's (aunt) Louise Buvelot. died, she was killed in an accident in the City (SF) hit by a drunk driver. Here's an article, she was working in Sebastopol at a processing plant and her hair got caught in the equipment and she had to rip out her hair to get out. July 30th, 1930 (Rae: I remember my mother telling me about that)

R: And your grandmother lived till?

G: Early 70's. We never ran across any Buvelot's in the US. and recently, about a year ago, I got an email from someone. About 5 years before that someone sent me a copy of ....named Marc Louis Buvelot. The same name as my grandfather, was a famous painter in Australia, landscapes. Had studied in Switzerland and Paris. and the year My grandfather was born, he left Switzerland. My grandfather was raised by a step uncle or half uncle and had a bad time. Then came over here. We're looking into this, we think possibly the painter was his father. They had the same names. In Australia, his work is in the National Gallery. On the internet there are 70 or 80 references to Buvelot, some are mine, because of my involvement. There are 7 (board members?) of the (Coast Federated Miwok) I started out as Treasurer of the group. There's Greg Sarris. I was on the board for quite a few years, got off as we started getting more tribal work that had to be done when we switched our process. I also do flintknapping. Do you have a library at the Museum. Let me give you this. It's something we did last December. We put together at the kids level, a book on Coast Miwok culture. The Tom Smith book done by MAPOM. This is one of our council members, Frank Ross, who lives in Novato. (points out people in pictures)

E/R: (We asked about Allen James, Pomo chief) Are there chiefs positions yet?

G: We have different setups of our organization. Greg Sarris would be our chief, though his official title is chairman. Some tribes have their business group with chairman, then they had a (traditional chief) There are members in our tribe that are named James too. Could be relatives.

R: But there was trading between the various groups?

G: Yes, different times of the year, heavy trading was done, they had festivals, now we call it the Big Time, at Point Reyes in July. Oolampali was a gathering place for that, people would come from... Beads that were made on the coast have been found as far as Arizona. They are tracing the obsidian flows from Annadel. We had a burial we just worked on Hy. 1 by Pt. Reyes. by the town, we just got the dating back of the flakes of obsidian they found and it went back..... there were 3 types of obsidian, one from Annadell, one from Napa and Borax Lake. It was traded far from these gatherings.

R: When you find something like that ,where do you send it?

G: The archeologists are working with Cal Trans. We're there as Native American observers. If its a burial, they have to reinterr. There are laws now (about this)

R: Because you're not a recognized tribe you don't have tribal lands now?

G: We have an office.

R: Then Gloria Armstrong in Graton....

G: That's private land. In our bill we included her land in name saying that if she would like to restore her parcel to put it back into trust, which means she wouldn't have to pay taxes, she could do that if she wants.

R: That was a short period of time (the Graton Rancheria)

G; That's why our attorney said we'd have to change our name to show a link to that original land. That would be the next step. It would be the vote of the tribe. Do we want to get land here? Something for economic development? We're in the gateway to the wine country. We've had proposals from people that want to set up various ventures that would be tourist oriented. Hotels and...

R: It seems the people working on this are persistent enough to hand on and work towards this.. so everyone may have different ideas of what should be done?

G: Yes, what we try to do in our council too is get a mix of families not all one side. Of the 20 families I don't think there is anyone that comes from the same family group. So they wouldn't start calling all the shots.

(discussion of cremation and burials., tapes cuts in and out)

E: A cultural center would be an incredible draw.

G: There is property too at the headlands. The Museum here is trying to get. I have two boys.

end of tape.